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The Memoirs

The Kennedy Team Made A Real Mess Of Vietnamese War

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NEW YORK: In the book "A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House," historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. asserts that a baffled, frustrated President Kennedy intended to replace Secretary of State Dean Rusk in 1964. Unless the author, who was a special assistant to Kennedy, has written proof of this or witnesses to it, the matter becomes one of blind trust in Mr. Schlesinger's word.

Is this the stuff of which history is made? Or is it the stuff of political infighting with a hitting-below-the-belt technique?

HOW CAN WE OUTSIDERS be sure that whatever Kennedy may have said to Schlesinger or Sorensen or even to Robert Kennedy on various occasions was not said in fleeting moments of annoyance or elation having no lasting significance? Many a top executive makes offhand or spur-of-the-moment remarks to his assistants which are merely the emotional expression of a passing mood, not the reflection of a fixed intention or positive decision.

Even if President Kennedy did confide some of his secret political plans to Arthur Schlesinger, what good can emerge from divulgence now? The man with the power of executive appointment is gone; only the confidant remains, if, indeed, he was a confidant and not merely a sounding-board in this particular case.

WHAT EMERGES FROM Schlesinger's book so far—in the parts published by Life magazine—is an impression of the author's own desire to see Robert S. McNamara become secretary of state, to see a "secret group" of 30 men run foreign policy in the White House, and to see "liberal" activists run the U. S. government.

What seems to be seeping out from the "historical" writings of Schlesinger, of Theodore White and of Theodore Sorensen, so far, is the authors' personal qualities as eulogists of John F. Kennedy rather than historians of his political career, and an impressionists rather than factualists.

FROM ALL ACCOUNTS of the Bay of Pigs disaster, however, there emerges the solid fact that the Joint Chiefs correctly chose the port of Trinidad as the best landing place for the guerrilla operation against Castro, and wanted it to have preceding U. S. air strikes and then air cover.

They were overruled by President Kennedy who, we are told, never was "sold" on the military effort to liberate Cuba from Castro's grip. Half-hearted in support of this CIA-planned effort, he gave it only half-a-loaf backing.

After the terrible fiasco, which severely hurt our national prestige, the coterie of civilian advisers around Kennedy did everything possible to protect him from the adverse consequences, blaming this one and that one for this or that, but never admitting the truth until mounting evidence of it forced Robert Kennedy to admit courageously, "My brother made a mistake."

HISTORY IS A SOBER judge. Today the emotional effects of President Kennedy's untimely death should not sway our analysis of his record in the White House; nor should lovely photographs of JFK with his wife and children distort our clear view of the Kennedy administration. We can mourn for a lost young life and grieve for his family without subscribing to a political legend.

What Americans must now face are the hard realities of our involvement in extremely difficult situations which President Johnson inherited from his predecessor. It was John F. Kennedy who expanded U. S. involvement in Vietnam, after his diplomatic emissary to Laos, Averell Harriman, had foisted a coalition-with-Communists regime there. The men whom Kennedy appointed to positions of top command in the Vietnam venture — "General" McNamara, Maxwell Taylor and Henry Cabot Lodge—have made a ghastly mess of it.

PRESIDENT JOHNSON has the American people's support in his efforts in Vietnam. But many of us wish he would get rid of previous administration holdovers and pick a brand new Vietnam team.